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ABSTRACT

Fifty disadvantaged urban boys ranging from ages 11 to 16 participated in a 6-week summer writing workshop patterned on the ideas of James Moffett, Donald Murray, and John Dixon. The students were divided into groups of five, were trained in methods of group discussion (aided by video tapes to prepare them for profitable analysis of each others' work), and were given personal journals for daily free writing. Students were then asked to write something for the group, and fruitful discussion ensued on the differences between private and public writing, feel for audience, and choice of language and incidents. Units on memory writing, sensory writing, and dramatic writing were taught to develop ability to utilize detail and skills in observation and close textual analysis. The workshop captured the imagination and enthusiasm of most students (with 45 completing the majority of assignments), although the teachers' initial overemphasis on mechanics and the students' inability to revise created problems. Individual instruction via tape recordings was recommended for teaching proper selling and punctuation. (MF)

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A Summer Writing Workshop for Disadvantaged Students: Trial Run for Moffett, Murray, and Dixon

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Several times in *A Student Centered Language Arts Curriculum*, James Moffett questions the validity of his approach to writing for disadvantaged urban students. I taught a six week writing workshop for approximately fifty such students who are institutionalized at Mount St. John's School during this past summer. Although the students are removed from an urban environment and an urban school situation, the problems of absenteeism and no school work outside the class remained because of the special nature of the school's summer program. New students, a higher runaway rate in good weather, appointments for medical, social and psychiatric services and an afternoon and evening recreation program made for a constant flux in the class population. In addition, these students, all boys and ranging in ages from eleven to sixteen, have problems which are beyond the ordinary. They are placed at Mount St. John's for reasons that include parental neglect, inability to adapt to a more conventional school environment and "pre-delinquent" behavior (breaking and entering, arson, and car theft are a few examples that characterize "pre-delinquent").

The writing workshop was given at the 7th, 8th and 9th grade levels. I designed the units, which usually consisted of a sequence of writing assignments grouped around one particular focus, to last one week. A first draft of each individual assignment within

a sequence could be completed within one class period. This scheme was responsible, in part, for the success of the workshop. The ideas of Moffett, Professor Donald Murray (speaker at the 1968 CCTE Fall Conference and author of *A Writer Teaches Writing*), and John Dixon (*Growth Through English*), which I borrowed liberally, did the rest.

I began the workshop by training each class in small group discussion since these groups would be reading each other's writing, commenting upon it and reading the revision. After dividing the classes into groups of five each, I distributed a list of discussion rules, discussed them, and then appointed a spokesman in each group who would introduce the topic and give a general summary at the end of the discussion. Each group chose their own topic. I taped each group discussion with a video tape recorder (VTR) borrowed from PROJECT LEARN (a regional resource center for media in Old Saybrook) and replayed each discussion for the entire class to comment upon.

The VTR was a highly successful device in providing motivation and interest. As a tool for teaching group discussion, it seemed to help in providing some foundation for future group work involving the writing assignments. These particular students have a difficult time working in a group situation. The video tape allowed them to become aware of themselves and their actions in a group: they could actually experience their own contributions and reactions and at the same time witness their classmates' analysis of those actions. My own oversights lessened the effectiveness of this unit. First, I didn't perceive the basic difference between speaking about a group-chosen topic when all members of the group are offering their opinions on one subject and reading and commenting upon the very different pieces of writing that the other four members of one's group have produced. This particular error diminishes the carry-over from small group discussion to small group reading and commentary. Secondly, in working with writing, the group tends to work in pairs while reading and commenting, and then individually once each student has had his paper read and begins to revise. Finally, although the role of spokesman structures a discussion group and introduces the no-

tions of a beginning and an end, especially if the role is rotated among the members of the group, a spokesman is not needed in a group working on writing. Moreover, the carry-over of a beginning and an end is minimal when done in the above fashion. In summary the chief effect of group discussion training was to introduce the students to group work in general.

The first writing sequence began simultaneously with the group discussion training. I distributed a journal notebook to each student along with the following directions: the purpose of the journal is to give you a place to write down what you see, feel and think. Take a good look at what is going on around you and record what is important for you in your journal. No one will read your journal unless you invite them to. You will have 10 to 15 minutes every day in class to write. At the end of the first three weeks of the writing workshop you will base a writing assignment or two on your journal. After the students read the directions, questions immediately arose about what a journal was, what did I really want it for and can we swear in it. Before I could answer the first question, a student mentioned a ship's log like the one kept on board the Enterprize, the star ship of the TV show "Star Trek." Another student brought up the idea of a diary, and we suddenly were launched into what proved to be a battle over what a log and a diary were and the difference between the two. After several spontaneous verbal examples of log and diary entries (during which one boy bolted out of the room only to return waving a copy of *Robinson Crusoe*), I asked the class to differentiate between a log, a diary and a journal as I outlined it in the directions. The discussion was fruitful since it influenced each student in his interpretation of what to do in his journal.

My purpose in the journal assignment was to encourage the habit of writing regularly and freely on a schedule with students who did not have any experience in journal writing and who were apt to have an adverse reaction to any directions that restricted them by delineating a more specific focus. My use of the journal is very elementary. With more experienced students, or as a sequel to this assignment, journals with an emphasis on one focus could be used. For example, one could have a journal which recorded

only visual details (or aural, tactile, etc.), or one which records observations of interesting characters or situations that might lead to a story and so on. My own preference for a sequence of journals would be one that begins in the elementary fashion of the one above, and then proceeds based on the perception of detail. The implications of that preference are that it leads a writer eventually to the poetry of detail or concrete image and the invocation of a mood. The lyric poem, imagery and possibly tone are the larger concepts that could be arrived at. If one were interested in leading students to narrative or dramatic writing, a different sequence starting from the same base could be designed.

After a week and a half, during which time we were working with group discussion, journal writing began to wear thin. Rather than wait the full three weeks to give an assignment based on the journal, I decided to give one immediately. Since I had already planned narrative writing for the sequence following the group discussion, the assignment based on the journal was designed to focus the student on narrative. Secondly, I wanted to demonstrate the difference between private writing and writing for an audience and, if possible, show that an audience influences what an author will reveal about himself and his attitudes toward his subject, his audience and himself. The assignment follows:

> Write down the most important thing about yourself that you think another person should know. This will be read by at least one other person and possibly by part or all of the class.

I collected the assignment at the end of the class. The next day I asked the students to read their journals rather than write in them at the beginning of class. I then passed back the above assignment and asked them to note any differences between that and the journal. We discussed the differences in class (obscenity, the selection of what one is willing to tell an audience, and the fear of revealing oneself were some of the things we touched upon), and out of this discussion came an awareness that was, perhaps, barely conscious of what it was aware of, of choice of

language (dialect, usage level and diction) and choice of incident. Often these topics are not formally taught as subjects until the last three years of high school; yet this particular approach made students aware that they used them as early as the seventh grade. Dramatic writing, the last unit in the workshop, was especially effective in developing an awareness of dialect and usage. After this discussion, I re-collected the autobiographical items and dittoed four or five sample papers for each class. We read each sample closely in class and discussed it. Out of this discussion came ideas about a need for a title, what a title should do for a reader, the need for details and examples rather than vague, general statements, and the advantages and disadvantages of a list of incidents versus the expanded, single incident. Although the assignment implied a single incident, I found the discussion of the list versus one, expanded incident to be more valuable than correctness in following directions. The students also spent a good deal of time inferring exactly what the writer meant from what he wrote down and from what he had omitted. I find that kind of activity very valuable as a reading skill, and, in fact, this whole approach to writing teaches close reading. I also encouraged corrections in spelling, punctuation and usage as the last thing in reading and commenting upon a paper. That was a mistake. Most students think, due to previous training by language arts teachers, that these three things are the only things that deal with English. Their future work in small groups, therefore, emphasizes these areas and neglects the other questions a reader could ask a writer. Furthermore, this emphasis leads writers to consider revision as recopying. Spelling, punctuation and usage deviations are the easiest problems to identify and, therefore, more available to solution than other writing problems. Individual instruction via a tape recorder in aural discrimination of sounds and exercises in visual memory (the spelling list) on an individual basis seems to me to be a more effective way of handling the problem of spelling. Using the tape recorder to teach comma and end punctuation by following the intonation pattern of the sentence also seems to be an effective solution which could be handled on an individual basis.

After this discussion of sample papers the classes broke into groups to read and comment upon all the papers written by members of that group. The students followed the same pattern in the small groups that I had in discussing the sample papers with the entire class. I think that is a better method of teaching group work than the discussion training that I had used at the beginning of the workshop. The revisions that came out of this group reading and commentary were published in a class "Autobiography Book." I followed the same pattern of sample paper discussion, small group discussison and publication at the end of an assignment sequence with each unit in the workshop.

Rather than base any more assignments on the journal, I continued to allow 10 minutes a day for journal writing, and moved on to other assignments in narrative writing. I borrowed James Moffett's assignments on "Memory Writing" from *A Student Centered Language Arts Curriculum* and used them as a basis for my next unit. Rather than repeat the assignments here, I refer the reader to Moffett's book. At this point I also suggested that some observations about past events might be appropriate for the journal. Again, we published a "Memory Book" for each class and some stories, tall tales and memoirs that these particular assignments inspired.

The next unit was "Sensory Writing." Moffett has a sequence of assignments with this title that will work well in more conventional schools, but the limitations on the boys' movements and the inability to do any school work outside the classroom negated any borrowing on my part. I began this unit by reading several of May Swenson's poems from *Poems to Solve* (Scribner's, 1966) and asking the students to guess what was being written about from the details in the poem. I also wrote some poems about various creatures (snake, frog, mole, and a praying mantis) and used those. The students then began to join in. At first I restricted them to items in the room, then to what they could see from the windows, and then to people whom we all knew. The only rule was not to name the object or person. At this point I began to leave things in their folders and asked them to write about them so their group could guess them. Again, the no naming rule was in

effect. This particular idea snowballed and everyone began leaving things to be described in other people's folders. I also suggested that the students make lists of details in their journals, beginning with what one could see and working to hearing, smell, feel and taste. In order to teach the concept of order, I paired the students off and asked one partner to read his description of the item in his folder while the other fellow tried to draw the object on the chalkboard. I used this assignment after I was well into "sensory writing" because I wanted each student to have experience in using many details before he encountered any formula for structuring them. I think this unit was valuable in that it showed the student-writers that readers are interested by details. At the end of the unit I reprinted the following sentence from an earlier autobiographical item: "I think they should know that I have a good personality," and asked the class if they had any suggestions for revision. Their suggestions indicated that they were aware that details were needed to make the sentence more meaningful to a reader.

The final unit was "dramatic writing." We began by writing down people or things that had to be acted out in pantomime for the rest of the class to guess at. A drunk, an angel, a king, an angle and a twelve-inch ruler were some of the things that were suggested. The twelve-inch ruler is a lulu. A 9th grader dreamed that up and trapped me into doing it. It is very difficult for a six foot, 250 pound man to play a twelve-inch ruler. The second assignment in this unit asked the students to write down a situation in which one person was involved. Again, we used improvised pantomime to act the situation out. The third assignment added a second actor and improvised dialog. Not only did the actors improvise the dialog, but they also began to improvise the setting. At that point we began to write skits with written dialog and directions for the actors. I deliberately restricted the skits to one scene. I also used the video tape recorder throughout this unit. Rather than publish all the skits that were written, I recorded them on the video tape, and we replayed the skits for the other classes and the rest of the staff. This unit captured the imagination and enthusiasm of everyone, and most of us were reluctant to see the end of summer school.

The writing workshop worked well for a large majority of the students. Five of the fifty completed only two pieces of writing, but the remaining forty-five wrote most of the assignments. By the time we started the "sensory writing" unit, the students were functioning very well in small group situations. The only persistent problems were an overemphasis on correctness and an inability to revise. In the six weeks that were allotted for summer school, I chose to give the students a variety of writing experiences. In the course of a school year a great deal of time could be spent with each unit. I also question the arrangement of the units. If I were to begin again, I would probably start with the "sensory writing."' In conclusion, it seems to me that the approach to writing advocated by Moffett, Murray, and Dixon works with disadvantaged students.